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Nineteenth Century Saint Joseph, Missouri U. S. A.



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NINETEENTH CENTURY SAINT JOSEPH

At the beginning of the nineteenth century French fur traders had their headquarters at the site of the present city of Saint Joseph. One of the most colorful fur traders North America produced was Joseph Robidoux. His life spanned many long years of fur trading, extending to the Pacific Coast, to Fort Dearborn, now known as Chicago, and New Orleans. His grandfather had come to Saint Louis from Montreal, using the waterways principally, and he was accompanied by his son, also named Joseph; and so the Joseph Robidoux who founded Saint Joseph, Missouri, is sometimes identified by historians as Joseph Robidoux III, although he was never thus identified in Saint Joseph.

The Chouteau family in Saint Louis had almost a monopoly in the fur trade with Osage Indians south of the Missouri River, and Joseph Robidoux III devoted his attention to remnants of the Missouri tribe on the left bank of the river, together with Iowa, Sac and Fox, and a small band of Sioux Indians in extreme northwest Missouri when he arrived in 1799.

Joseph Robidoux was sixteen years old when he first traded at the present site of Saint Joseph. He returned to stay in 1803. In 1804, when Lewis and Clark were on their way up the Missouri River, one of their boatmen pointed out the Robidoux cabins where he had worked. When Lewis and Clark were returning down the river in 1806, they accosted Robidoux as he was trading with the Indians at the mouth of Wolf River, in Doniphan County, Kansas, three miles northwest of Saint Joseph, and demanded he show his credentials permitting him to trade with the Indians. This he did, for he was here by

The American Fur Company offered to let him stay at Roy's Branch north of Blacksnake Hills, for \$1800 a year. He accepted and soon moved to Blacksnake Hills.

Joseph Robidoux was joined by his brothers and 20 or 30 French fur traders. Other French settlers came from across the river from Illinois and present Indiana to live among their French compatriots to escape the British yoke.

When the gentlemen of London and Paris ceased wearing beaver top hats in the late 1830's, the fur trade declined and Astor withdrew from Blacksnake Hills, leaving Robidoux in complete control. Joseph E. Robidoux, the oldest son, had been his father's companion for many years and was associated with his father in the fur trade at the time. He was Joseph's only son by Eugenie Delisle and was sometimes called "Indian Joe."

Joseph E., or "Indian Joe" represented the government when the Platte Purchase Treaty was signed with the Indian tribes on September 17, 1836, at Fort Leavenworth. By the terms of this Treaty the Platte country passed into the hands of the white man.

In the spring of 1843, John James Audubon, the great naturalist and artist, journeyed up the Missouri to the Yellowstone. The trip from Saint Louis was made in a boat lent to him by Pierre Chouteau, Jr. In his journal of May 5, 1843, Audubon wrote: "At half-past twelve we reached the Blacksnake Hills settlement, and I was delighted to see this truly beautiful site for a town or city, as will be no doubt some fifty years hence. The hills themselves are about 200 feet above the river, and slope down quietly into the beautiful prairie that extends over some thousands of acres, of the richest land imaginable."

Audubon's visit to Blacksnake Hills caused him to make a prophesy that was fulfilled sooner than he guessed. Later in the summer of 1843, Chouteau also helped Joseph Robidoux to lay out his new town of Saint Joseph by a loan of \$6,372.57.

Two surveyors competed for Joseph Robidoux's favor by submitting plats for the new town. They were Simeon Kemper and Frederick W. Smith. The plat of Frederick W. Smith was chosen over Simeon Kemper's. According to the late Chris Rutt, well known historian, Robidoux rejected Kemper's plat because he had made the proposed streets too wide. Most people believe that Robidoux selected the Smith plat because in it Smith had named the new town Saint Joseph. Still others think that the old French preference for narrow streets caused Robidoux to select the Smith plat. Simeon Kemper was a leading citizen for 42 years and had amassed great wealth only to lose much of it during the War Between the States. He helped to lay out the route of the Hannibal and Saint Joseph Railroad, the first to reach the western boundary of Missouri.

He and Frederick W. Smith, the original competing surveyors, were both pall bearers for Joseph Robidoux at his funeral in 1868.

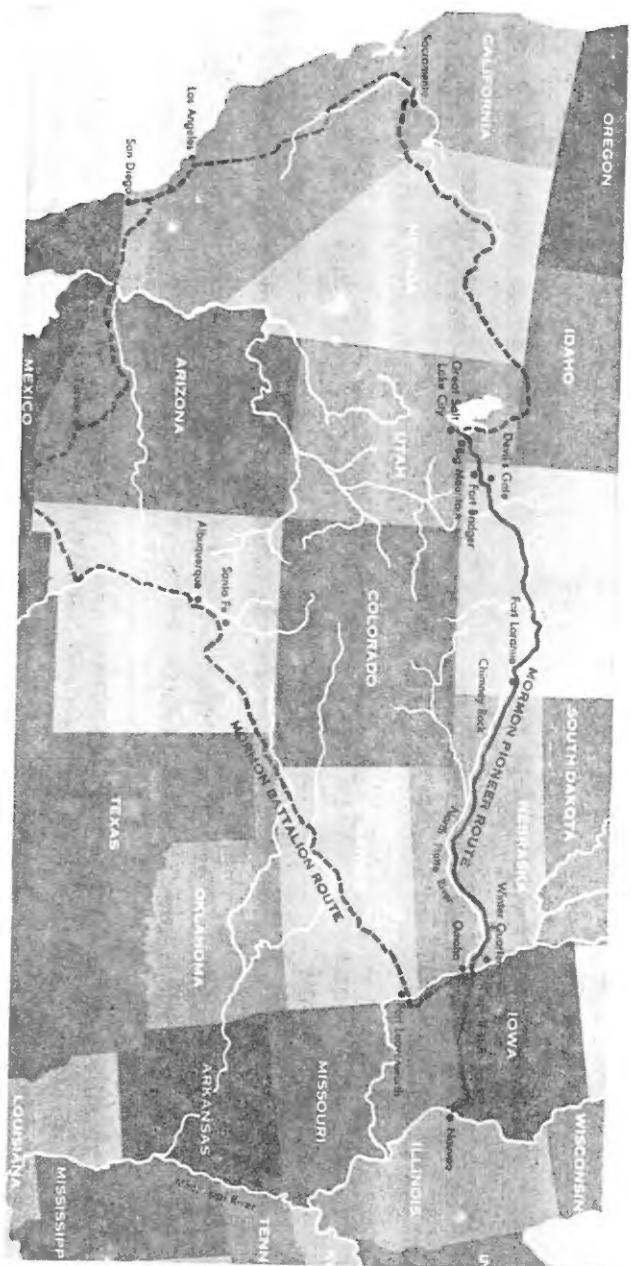
At the site of Sutter's fort on the great and swift south fork of the American River in Placer County, California. A year later, in the spring of 1849, 20,000 emigrants were camped around Saint Joseph awaiting green grass for their horses and oxen. Some of Saint Joseph's private fortunes date from that time, for Saint Joseph's merchants, craftsmen, saddle and harness makers, hemp growers, gunsmiths, and pork packers supplied the 49'ers at handsome profits. Among the merchants of that period was the late Milton Tootle, and Isreal Landis was a saddle and harness maker at that time.

The 1850's were the great steamboat days. Captain Thomas H. Brierly, whose luxurious country home still stands a few miles east was the operator of a great fleet of luxury steamboats which plied between Saint Louis and Saint Joseph.

Then in 1859 came the first railroad to reach the south-flowing Missouri River, the Hannibal and Saint Joseph Railroad. Senator Robert M. Stewart lobbied for the railroad and was given 600,000 acres of Federal land. Stewart later became the last governor of the State of Missouri before the Civil War. The surveyor for the railroad was Simeon Kemper and legal work was done by James O'Donoghue, both of Saint Joseph. The incorporators of the railroad were Joseph Robidoux, John Corby and Robert J. Boyd. On February 14, 1859, the first passenger train arrived from the east. Eight days later, on February 22, a special train, carrying delegations from Hannibal, Saint Louis and Chicago, left Hannibal at five o'clock in the morning and reached Saint Joseph late in the afternoon. The following morning, led by several brass bands, colorful prairie schooners and militia companies and citizens, they paraded to the mouth of Blacksnake Creek. There they were received by elderly Joseph Robidoux who had first made that spot his Indian trading post sixty years before. There the visiting delegations produced jars of water from the Atlantic Ocean, Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River, which were poured into the Missouri River, thereby marrying the great waters.

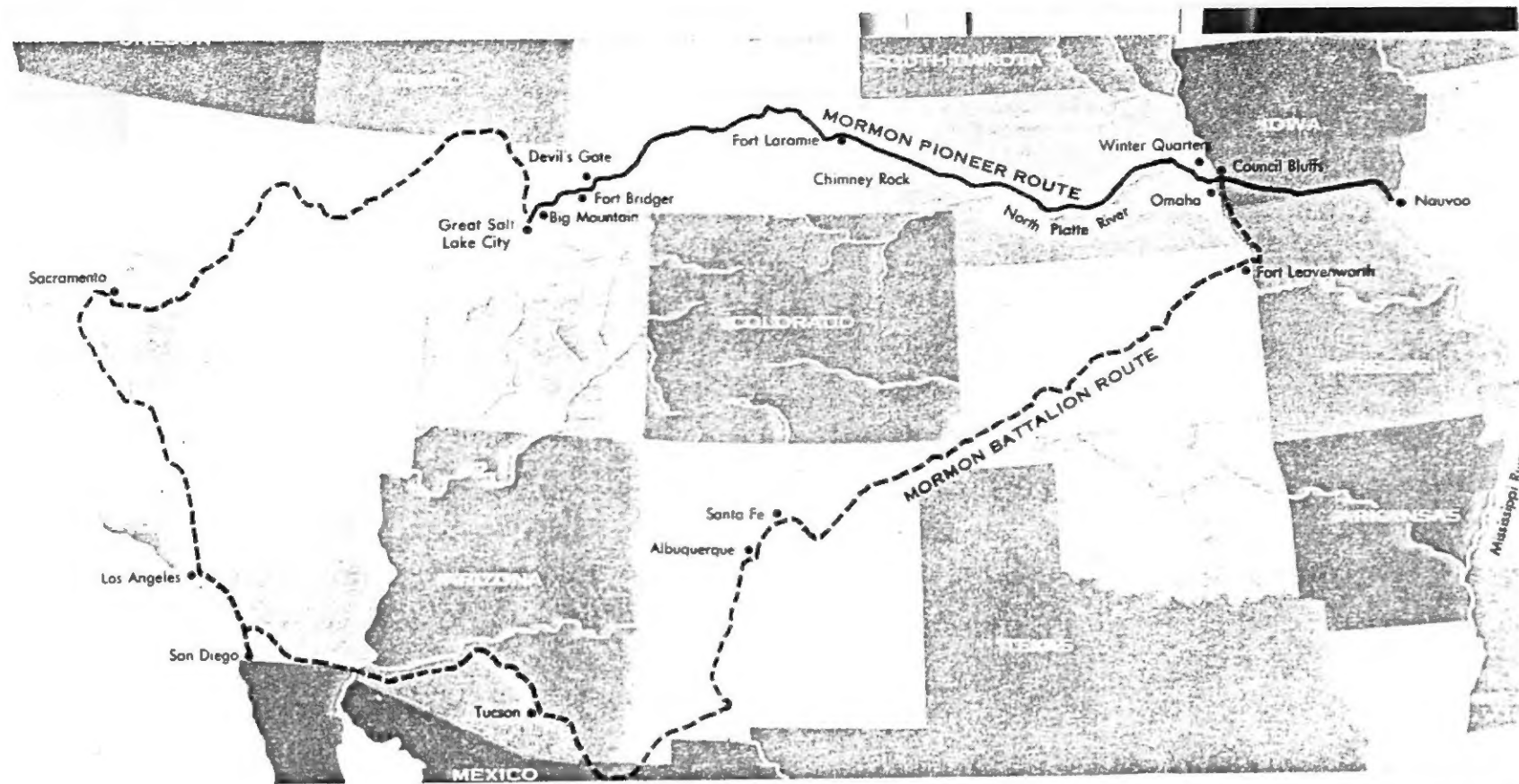
Such was the belief in Saint Joseph's future growth at that time, that there were some bantering remarks between the Chicago delegation and Saint Joseph citizens as to which town was destined to be the greater city. Willard P. Hall was the orator of the day. He later became governor of the state when he succeeded Governor Hamilton Gamble who died in January of 1864.

When the Hannibal and Saint Joseph road became a fact, business which had heretofore closely hugged the river and market square, began to look to the southeast. John Patee was one of the foremost citizens. He had platted his land at an early day and when the Hannibal and Saint Joseph road was projected had donated a strip of 40 acres for terminal and depot. This land stretches from Olive Street south to Mitchell Avenue, west of Eighth Street. In the firm belief that the future St. Joseph would build up around the railroad terminals, and with the assurance that the depot would be located at Penn Street, Mr. Patee built a magnificent hotel, which cost him about \$180,000, and which was then the second largest and



The Mormon trek

Map — courtesy Wheelwright Lithographing Co.
 1983



Map — courtesy Wheelwright Lithographing Co

The Mormon trek



